

Judit Molnár

FROM FROM THE HAZEL BOUGH TO FROM THE HAZEL BOUGH\*

"On whatever scale, and in whatever language, a literary text is always a piece of linguistic performance."

/Raymond Chapman/

I.

So far not much stylistic analysis has been done on Canadian literature; critics have mainly been interested in the question what makes a Canadian literary piece particularly Canadian. This is, certainly, an interesting issue but this time I am going to approach the poem From the Hazel Bough by Earle Birney from the point of view of literary stylistics.

In spite of the fact that Earle Birney is one of the outstanding poets of our century, I do not think that many people would be familiar with his poem From the Hazel Bough. That is why I put it down in full and ask the reader to follow the path that leads from From the Hazel Bough to from the hazel bough.

From the Hazel Bough

I met a lady  
on a lazy street  
Hazel eyes  
and little plush feet

her legs swam by  
like lovely trout  
eyes were trees  
where boys leant out

hands in the dark  
a river side  
round breasts rising  
with the fingers' tide

She was plump as a finch  
and live as a salmon  
gay as silk and  
proud as a Brahmin

we winked when we met  
and laughed when we parted  
never took time  
to be brokenhearted

but no man sees  
where the trout lie now  
or what leans out  
from the hazel bough

Literary critics and linguists have long been arguing about the validity of stylistics and have never been able to come to an agreement. Before the "close reading" of the poem, I would like to emphasize that the stylistic approach is only one of the possible approaches; providing some means for the understanding of a literary piece without claiming to be any more objective than other ways of interpreting literature. I can only agree with what I.A. Richards says: "A poem may be regarded as a suitcase /I regret that my metaphor is so old-fashioned/ which the poet may think he packs and the reader may think he unpacks."<sup>1</sup>

Reading the poem one would tend to think that the title and the last line /which are identical here, therefore could be called the "frame" of the poem/ set strict limits to the

poem's world. This is only true, however, if we think that the poet grasps one moment in time and does not proceed any further. But he does: from From the Hazel Bough to from the hazel bough: Through this circle the poem, as we shall see later, obtains an almost infinite span of time.

This poem has been described as cryptic<sup>2</sup>; my aim, through a careful reading and a possible analysis of the poem's personification, synecdoches, metaphors and similes, is to make it less ambiguous and more enjoyable for the reader. The figures of speech in the poem are concerned either with the lady's way of moving and her physical appearance or with her eyes. These two images are in the focus of the poem; what struck first the poet, and the reader about the lady were her hazel eyes and little plush feet.<sup>3</sup> So much so that her hazel eyes and her little plush feet actually stand for the lady's whole person. Thus, they are clear examples for synecdoche; part stands for the whole. Our ideas will be gathered around our two first impressions: the lady's hazel eyes and her little plush feet but in reversed order.

## II.

The visual image of the poem itself suggests movement. Everything is alive here, everything moves. Moving and being alive go together. In order to achieve this effect the poet incorporated the lady, the boys, the Brahmin and himself /human beings/; the tree with its boughs /a plant/; the trout, the finch, the salmon /animals/ into his poem. Movement is expressed in several ways. The following verbs are used for this purpose: met, swam by, leant, rising, winked, laughed, parted, took. With the exception of swam by and rising these verbs, in their present grammatical forms, express momentary actions. We have the sense of an on-going movement set against the background: a lazy street. Street is personified, being endowed with a quality /laziness/ characteristic of living beings thus contrasting the still

background with the foreground of action/s/. Personification is carried out with the help of an adjective /lazy/ and not a verb which is less frequent and presents an explicit case of fore-grounding. "The word foregrounding is used to describe the kind of deviation which has the function of bringing some item into artistic emphasis so that it stands out from its surroundings."<sup>4</sup>

The ground for the simile her legs swam by/like lovely trout is a particular kind of movement: swimming. The lady walked by so moothly as if she were gliding along. Let me point out here that the fourth stanza consists of four similes, too. Simile as such is usually less in the centre of interest than metaphor, often it is not even considered to be a trope. I agree with Chapman, however, who says: "Simile is the root-notion of tropes: the comparison derived from likeness perceived between two referents. There is clearly a very wide range of choice here, and the successful literary simile will point a likeness not usually discerned yet not so far-reachéd as to be purely subjective and therefore uncommunicative. At least one item generally refers to something perceptible by the senses, which foregrounds the other item by its actuality."<sup>5</sup> It is not by accident that with the exception of gay as silk and pround as a Brahmin, animals: the finch, the salmon, the trout serve as vehicles for the similes. The salmon and the trout are very similar fishes known of their brisk swimming: her legs swam by/like lovely trout; live as a salmon. Her little plush feet, already in the first stanza, refers to the lady's graceful gait in spite of her being plump as a finch. Of all the similes gay as silk is the most poetic. The interpretation of the other similes is not so much context-bound as is the case with gay as silk. If we take gay as silk in the context of the poem and relate it to the first stanza, then apart from the meaning that she was as "brilliant" as silk in

general is, we may discover some further overtone to it. The adjectival construction, also a synecdoche, little plush feet in the fourth line of the first stanza refers to the lady's way of walking. Plush can mean a type of silk /!/ with a soft nap. In the context of the whole poem where an overwhelming sense of movement is manifest, the lady's gait could provide a possible ground for the simile gay as silk, too. That is, the simile may refer, apart from the her physical appearance and emotional state, to the lady's graceful gait; what is more, to her somewhat ostentatious /gay/ manner of walking. In general similes are less evocative than metaphors, still it should not prevent us from revealing more and more meanings while interpreting them. "The language of a poem seems characteristically 'concentrated' because it allows for such an extraordinary and continuous expansiveness of meaning, not confined to finite and particular, determinants, but drawing on all we know that we can relate to it. The language of the poem continues to mean as long as we have meanings to provide for it. Its meanings are exhausted only at the limits of the reader's own experience and imagination."<sup>6</sup>

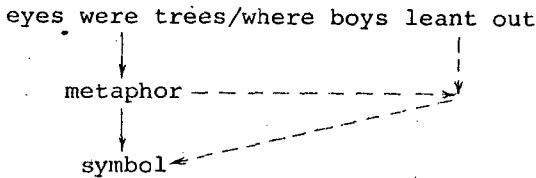
The tenor in all of the poem's similes is she, the lady. The vehicles vary; a Brahmin, silk, a trout, a finch, a salmon. Animals dominate, more precisely fishes; there are altogether three references to fishes in the poem which is very much in harmony with the third stanza: a river side; fingers' tide. In this poem, unlike many other Canadian literary pieces, the animals are not "victims" and no one drowns in the river; instead it is here, on the bank of the river that the lady and the poet come really close to each other.

The woman is depicted in the third stanza not as met in the street but probably later. A river side on the one hand sets the scene, but it can also refer to the woman's flank. The ground for the metaphor is the wave-like motion and the

similar look of the river and the woman's flank. The metaphorical meaning is made even more plausible by the last two lines in the stanza: round breasts rising /the undulating motion of the breasts is suggested/ and the fingers' tide. The hands in the first line are the woman's hands, swinging her arms as she was walking. The fingers, however, belong to the poet stroking the woman; the up and down movement is like the tide ebbing and flowing which provides the ground for the simile.

### III.

Now let us turn to the hazel eyes which were trees/where boys leant out. On the basis of their colour hazel eyes can be identified with the bush itself. But something more is meant here indicated by using the very word tree itself. The metaphor eyes were trees is transferred even further: to a symbol. "With metaphor, the poet talks about object X as though it were a Y; he uses Y-terminology to refer to X. With symbolism, he presents an object, X, and without his necessarily mentioning a further object, his way of presenting X makes us think that it is not only X, but also is or stands for something more than itself-some Y or other, or a number of 'Y's. It is as though, in doing this, the poet were trying to leap out of the medium of language altogether and to make his meaning speak through objects instead of through words. Even though he does not tell us what the object X stands for, or even that it does stand for anything, he makes us believe that it means, to him at least, something beyond itself."<sup>7</sup> Here something similar but not exactly the same happens; by adding where boys leant out to the metaphor he created, the poet endows it with a symbolic meaning. He explicitly turns his "private" metaphor into a traditional symbol.



"In its most general sense, the symbolism of the tree denotes the life of the cosmos: its consistence, growth, proliferation, generative and regenerative processes."<sup>8</sup>

"Though its seasonal dying and renewal it became a female symbol of the earth's fecundity. The birth of Hedonist from a tree, retold as a Greek myth, was originally celebrated as part of a primitive fertility rite."<sup>9</sup> As far as the tree as symbol is concerned these two explanations should suffice for our study. Here the poet presents X /the eyes/ as meaning something beyond themselves; a possible future: descendants.

#### IV.

On a first reading this poem may seem to be an "easy" lyric piece but the world it comprises is definitely of a serious nature. The two images the poem is actually built on are brought together in the last stanza just like in the second stanza and the last two lines of the first stanza. But the difference is obvious. In the second stanza: her legs swam by/like lovely trout, but in the last stanza the movement slows down: where the trout lie now. Her legs are no longer moving they lie. This metaphor /her legs identified with the trout's moving, more precisely with their not-moving) can only be interpreted in the context of the whole poem just like the simile gay as silk. If the trout only lie now and have ceased to move then, accordingly, she may as well rest in peace for ever. The "memento mori motif"<sup>10</sup> is, indeed, present in the poem. This is a sudden and

unexpected ending especially because it is so much in contrast with the previous stanza which is lively and happy. But the feeling of shortness is there, too; we would tend to think that it was only on one occasion that the lady and the poet met but because of the line never took time, it would seem more like several times. Whichever one, this "affair" was so short that they did not have the time to be broken-hearted. At the end of the poem, however, the poet does sound brokenhearted. Turning back to our metaphor and symbol eyes were trees/where boys leant out; there was the possibility of some future /offsprings/ in her eyes but that future in the last stanza has already become a past, an unfulfilled past, for the poet at least.

but no man sees  
where the trout lie now  
or what leans out  
from the hazel bough

This is how we get from From the Hazel Bough to from the hazel bough; from the eyes promising a future to a disillusioned, uncertain present and an even less certain future. The path in between is hard.

V.

It is hard, from a different point of view, for the reader, too: the poem is cryptic and enigmatic, but hopefully, even if we discovered meanings that were never intended, it has become less obscure by now. "The point is that we do not seek the one and 'correct' interpretation, for any meaning which the language can bear is correct within the poem."<sup>11</sup> With this, I would only like to invite further analyses through which new, or perhaps similar but more exhaustive interpretations could be attained.



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#### Notes

1. Richards, I.A., "Poetic Process and Literary Analysis" in Thomas A. Sebeok, Style in Language. /Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1960/ p. 12.
2. Aichinger, P., Earle Birney. /Boston: Twayne, 1979/, p. 43.
3. It is due to the considerable similarity of images in Birney's poem and in the poem Mikor az uccán átmént a kedves /"When the darling was crossing the street" - my translation/ by Attila József that about 70 % of a group of students found this Hungarian poem the most similar to From the Hazel Bough.
4. Chapman, R., Linguistics and Literature. /Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd., 1973/, p. 48.
5. Ibid., p. 75.
6. Smith, B. H., On the Margins of Discourse. /University of Chicago Press, 1978/, p. 37.
7. Nowotny, W., The Language Poets Use. /Bristol: The Athlone Press, 1963/, p. 175.
8. Cirlot J. R., A Dictionary of Symbols. trans. Sage J., /London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962/, p. 328.
9. Hall J., Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art. /London: Cox and Wyman Ltd, 1975/, p. 307.
10. Aichinger, *ibid.*
11. Chapman, *op.cit.* p. 66.